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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the curriculum documents and the writing of educators in Australia about literacy assessment indicates three common themes: literacy learning is assessed directly in a range of contexts from multiple sources; literacy learning is assessed via diverse techniques; and information gathered is stored and synthesized in a variety of ways. Recent developments that will shape future literacy education include the development of state-wide testing, the development of attainment levels and standards, and the development of a national curriculum and national approach to assessment. A number of tensions are apparent upon examination of what is happening to literacy assessment in Australia: (1) the federal government is striving for a national curriculum while state governments are developing their own curriculum frameworks; (2) most states in Australia have avoided employing single or particular measures to assess literacy; (3) an increase in time and effort required by teachers to report information to the states is likely; (4) each state has been surveying the literacy achievements of different age levels; and (5) it is not obvious how the results from national testing and the state-wide attainment level reporting will be used. In order that they do not lose all that they have achieved in literacy practice in their classrooms, educators will need to be more vigilant of the content of federal and state government policies. (Thirty-four references are attached.) (RS)

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Perspectives on literacy assessment in Australia

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This paper *Perspectives on literacy assessment in Australia* comprises three parts. The first part describes the current assessment practices in literacy learning in Australian primary classrooms. The section identifies the themes that appear to be common to the assessment practices found in schools today. The second part of the paper discusses three recent developments that will shape future literacy education and assessment in this country. They include the development of state-wide testing, the development of attainment levels and standards, and the development of a national curriculum and national approach to assessment. The third part of this paper examines the tensions that have arisen between recent developments in assessment at the national, state and classroom levels.

Current literacy assessment practices in Australia

Guidelines for the practices of literacy assessment are found in the curriculum documents developed by the staff of the education departments in the various states and territories of Australia (e.g., the Queensland Department of Education P-10 Assessment Guide, 1991; The Education Department of South Australia Literacy Assessment in Practice R-7 Language Arts, 1991). Schools are encouraged to use these education department documents to guide their selection of features of literacy that could be assessed and their selection of possible assessment techniques. A number of authors (e.g., Baskwill & Whitman, 1988; Brown & Cambourne, 1987; Butler & Turbill, 1984; Comber, 1989; Kemp, 1987, 1989) have also provided suggestions for classroom literacy assessment. An analysis of the curriculum documents and the writing of educators in this country about literacy assessment indicates a number of common themes.

Literacy learning is assessed directly in a range of contexts from multiple sources

On the whole, teachers in Australian primary schools are encouraged to obtain evidence of students' learning and achievement in reading and writing by direct assessment of student performance. This means that teachers gather and record their pupils' writing and reading behaviours directly in an ongoing fashion throughout the school year from a range of contexts. These contexts include the classroom, the school, home and wider community. In the past the school has been the dominant context and teachers have been the chief source of data on pupil

performance. However, increasingly teachers are learning to obtain information from a number of sources including the parents and the learner. In particular, importance and relevance is being given to the learner's self-assessments (Hall, 1989; McGregor, 1989; Weeks & Leaker, 1991). Teachers recognize that information from each of these settings and participants needs to be obtained in order to get a rich and complete picture of a child's skills, knowledge, attitudes and interests.

Literacy learning is assessed via diverse techniques

Information about children's skills, knowledge, attitudes and interests is collected through a diverse range of procedures. Interviews, anecdotal records, running records, planned observations, and work samples are some of the techniques commonly seen in Australian classrooms (Butler & Turbill, 1984; Kemp, 1987; Weeks & Learner, 1991). Characteristics of these assessment methods are that they are purposeful, meaningful and representative of the complexity of language.

One notable feature of the type of tasks that are being used for assessment is that increasingly they are not distinguishable from teaching and learning activities. Learning activities that are also assessment procedures are advocated by a number of authors (e.g., Cormack, 1989; Weeks & Leaker, 1991).

Information gathered is stored and synthesized in a variety of ways

Once collected the assessment information is stored in a number of different ways. Some classroom teachers make use of portfolios or folios. A portfolio is the accumulation of artefacts stored in a folder, box, pouch or concertina file. The artefacts have been selected by the teacher and/or pupil according to the domains and dimensions of literacy regarded as important, and according to the criteria and standards that are set in the classroom (Paris & van Kraayenoord, in press; van Kraayenoord & Paris, in press). Information from the artefacts in the portfolios is then used to develop a pupil profile. These provide a series of descriptive statements about the child's current levels of literacy development. The profiles of the child's strengths and weaknesses are used to give feedback to the child, to provide progress reports to

the parents, and to assist in further planning of the classroom and/or individual child's programme.

In summary, literacy assessment as it is practised in the majority of Australian primary schools involves the direct assessment of performance obtained from a number of participants in different contexts on multiple occasions. A variety of techniques are used, but increasingly instructional activities are also serving as assessment activities. Information obtained from these activities may be organized into portfolios and then used to develop pupil profiles. In turn, these profiles are used by teachers to make instructional decisions and to give feedback to the participants.

Recent developments

The current literacy assessment practices found in classrooms are, however, likely to undergo some change as a result of recent developments at the state and national levels of government. These developments are described below by making special reference to the states of Queensland and South Australia as examples.

State-wide literacy achievement

Increasing pressure from politicians, employer groups and the media who claimed there was a decline in literacy standards and a lack of accountability on the part of teachers has led state education departments in Australia to provide information about the nature and success of literacy learning in their state. Although all states in the country have made some response to the calls for accountability, nowhere is the contrasting response to the claims more evident than in Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales.

In Queensland in 1990, the state education department undertook a survey of some 21,000 students in Years 5, 7 and 9 (ages 10, 12 and 14 years respectively) in 741 state and non-state schools. (This represents 5% of the students in Years 5, 7 and 9 in Queensland). The goal of the 'Queensland Assessment of Performance Program' was to "provide comprehensive, statewide student performance information for accountability purposes" and to "provide statewide indicators of performance in aspects of mathematics, reading and writing" (Review and Evaluation Directorate, Department of Education, Queensland, 1991, p.1).

To examine aspects of reading and writing, several pencil and paper tasks considered relevant to the curriculum, involving a variety of response formats and covering a range of genres were developed. (Tasks were developed by a number of teachers and curriculum specialists, reviewed and revised by expert reference groups and trialled). Tasks were marked by a number of different teachers, using a scoring system to establish gradations in pupils' responses for the chosen features of reading and writing. Then via the use of item response techniques the items (that is, the question or the aspect tested) were placed on a common scale. This allowed for the development of scales indicating 'benchmarks' for performance. Reading and writing performance were described in 5 broad levels on a Reading Scale and a Writing Scale respectively. Summary descriptions have been developed which indicate the characteristics at each level. Sample 'item point' descriptions containing information on the test task involved have also been provided (Review and Evaluation Directorate, Department of Education, Queensland, 1991).

Using the results from the survey, the Queensland Department of Education has been able to provide information across schools on pupil achievement in Years 5, 7 and 9. While not everyone was pleased with the results of the survey (Brisbane Courier Mail 5/10/91 Brisbane Courier Mail, 7/10/91), by and large the public seems to have been appeased by this exercise in accountability. The state government has indicated that future surveys will be conducted using the indicators of performance (the benchmarks) as a reporting mechanism and allowing performance to be compared over time. Who will be assessed and how often has not yet been made known.

Similar to Queensland, South Australia also sampled student progress beginning in 1990. This South Australian survey remains one of the most ambitious and uniquely comprehensive attempts to examine what was occurring at a state-wide level in terms of literacy learning. Initiated in 1989, the three year, 1 million dollar project, Writing and Reading Assessment Program (WRAP) sought to survey the literacy activities and performance of students in Years 6 and 10 (ages 11 and 15) in Catholic, independent and education department schools. Like Queensland, South Australia used a light sampling approach.

WRAP focused on 3 areas. Firstly, an audit of the range of students' literacy experiences was undertaken. This curriculum mapping exercise involved documenting the literacy activities that existed in the classrooms studied in terms of content, audience, purpose, choices, length of time spent on the content, length of the products themselves, and types of thinking that the experiences required. Secondly, a series of classroom-based reading and writing tasks, comprising a range of tasks and a variety of topics, and in line with the curriculum documents were developed. Both final products and drafts were collected. These tasks examined both the achievement of students and the processes and strategies used to accomplish the tasks in reading and writing. Thirdly, students' attitudes towards reading and writing and their perceptions of themselves as learners were obtained (Comber, Laslett, Perkins & Weeks, 1991). Scoring procedures were developed. Writing achievement, for example was examined both holistically and analytically. Rising scales were developed and used for the scoring, followed by a moderation process which resulted in several score bands. (Subsequently these have been used in the development of the Levels of Attainment in South Australia - see later discussion). The results of this study have been documented in several academic journals and at conferences (Comber, Laslett, Perkins & Weeks, 1991; Laslett, 1991)

The South Australian Education Department has indicated that surveys like that of WRAP will be conducted in the future (Boomer, 1991). However, Laslett (1991) has warned that any future assessments must involve the same tasks and assessment tools if comparisons of student performances are to be made.

In contrast to Queensland and South Australia, New South Wales (NSW) has taken another route to state-wide assessment. In that state a basic skills test in literacy (and numeracy) for all children in Years 3 and 6 (ages 8 and 11) was introduced in 1989. This is a compulsory test to be taken by all children in these year levels across the state. Developed by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER), the Basic Skills Test of Literacy is a standardized test, mainly comprising multiple-choice items.

Cambourne and Turbill (1991) have provided criticism of the use of basic skills testing in literacy in NSW pointing to the lack of congruity between the current views of literacy learning and the views of evaluation as demonstrated by this test. They argue that the theories

of language education operating in NSW schools are naturalistic, context-dependent and ecological, whereas the paradigm of evaluation used in this mandatory state-wide testing exercise is reductionist and rationalist in its origin. Laslett (1991) makes a similar point about the need for alignment between views of literacy learning and assessment. He states:

If we as educators, fail to use literacy assessment procedures which take into account the complexity of language and the diverse range of contexts in which language is used, the task [of monitoring pupil performance] will fall, by default to narrow standardized testing.
(p.45)

It is apparent then that the accountability measures that have been put into place to monitor performance and literacy standards vary from state to state. Depending on their viewpoint on assessment people regard themselves and their children as either fortunate or unlucky to have the state system of assessment that they have. Whether or not the current state positions on monitoring literacy achievement will be maintained in a volatile political climate is not clear.

Attainment Levels, Performance Indicators and Benchmarks

One thing that is clear, however is that alongside these surveys of state-wide literacy achievement, all states are trying to describe both the literacy domains that should be assessed and the behaviours and knowledge that represent progress within these domains. Each state has or is currently developing descriptions of increasing proficiency in reading and writing behaviour and knowledge. Just as was developed in the surveys, the descriptions of achievements in reading and writing are sequentially arranged along a continuum. The levels or bands of proficiency are being seen by some as standards that will be used by state education departments to report to the public about literacy achievement in schools in the same or in similar ways as was done in the surveys. These levels have been variously labelled as attainment levels, performance indicators, and benchmarks.

At the time of writing, South Australia was about to release their "Levels of Attainment". The education department in that state has used information from the analyses of

the classroom materials and tasks, and pupils' performance in WRAP to identify the levels of literacy students displayed at various ages. In developing the levels of attainment, the standards are being referenced by adding exemplars of students' work to the descriptions. Queensland is currently beginning the process of identifying "Benchmarks". It has been suggested that the proposed Benchmarks will be more comprehensive than those identified by the Queensland Assessment of Performance Program.

Weeks and Leaker (1991), two South Australian educators, have identified one of the criticisms levelled at attempts to establish attainment levels. The criticism relates to the fact that some indicator charts that have been developed to date focus only on a limited range of basic skills and not on the complexity of language learning or on the interrelated and integrated aspects of literacy (Weeks & Leaker, 1991). The authors argue that instead, attainment level charts need to show the complexity of literacy learning in terms of "levels of clusters, knowledge, skills and understandings" and that the levels should be used by teachers as a "broad template" against which they can monitor the literacy progress of their pupils.

The WRAP team has also criticized charts of attainment levels that "plot simple skills at the lower levels and then build on these in a cumulative manner" (Comber, Laslett, Perkins & Weeks, 1991, p. 205). (The "Victorian Literacy Profiles" (1990), the scales of achievement used in the State of Victoria have been criticized by the WRAP team for following this model.) Instead, the WRAP team argue that evidence from their project shows that "less experienced learners frequently use the skills which, in many performance indicator charts, are allotted to the top levels" (Comber et al., 1991, p. 205). Thus, they argue that attainment level charts must reflect the fact that many literacy behaviours will appear at all levels, and not just at one level or contingent on other behaviours having already manifested themselves. To date the reporting of information in terms of indicators is not widespread. Even in Victoria, one of the States that have "released" their Literacy Profiles, the performance indicators will be used for the first time this year (1992) with Year 6 students and with students in Years 3 and 9 in 1993. Their usefulness as a means of reporting to the community has yet to be established. In addition, only a careful analysis of the documents being produced by South Australia and

Queensland will indicate whether the weaknesses of earlier attempts to produce descriptions of literacy proficiency have been overcome.

A national curriculum and a national approach to assessment

In September 1991, the federal government's paper 'Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy' was released. Referred to as the 'White paper', it focused on 4 general areas: (1) the development of a national curriculum, (2) adult literacy, (3) languages other than English, and (4) adult (migrant) English as a second language. The first area, the development of a national curriculum is of concern here. In spelling out the role of schools in the development of language and literacy, the purpose of the national curriculum according to the paper is to identify what should be taught in schools across the country in the English language arts, as well as to establish the national proficiency standards and achievement 'profiles' (levels) for various stages of schooling.

Together with the call for a national curriculum, the paper 'Australia's Language' called for nation-wide testing for all children at the end of primary school (age 11 or 12 depending on the state) and at the end of Year 9 (age 14). The federal Minister of Education at the time, Mr Dawkins, argued that the policy of national testing was a declaration of support for the concept of national assessment of literacy, but that what was proposed was not a national test "nor as proposed in the past, particularly in NSW [New South Wales], a series of one-off crude literacy tests" (Canberra Times, 3 September 1991, p. 3). Many educators were pleased to have such a definitive statement against adoption of a national standardized test, nevertheless we are uncertain what a 'policy of national testing' entails. However, the rhetoric being used currently is for a national *approach* to assessment.

Pressure for a national approach to standards in essential learnings, or at least for a high degree of comparability, is coming from the Commonwealth, the business community and from those who speak on behalf of the mobile student population. (Queensland Department of Education, *Education Views*, 17 January, 1992, p. 4.)

The meaning of a national curriculum and a national approach to assessment became somewhat clearer when the 'National Statement on English for Australian Schools' (July, 1991) was read as a national curriculum statement. This draft document was a statement of "agreed goals, principles and content" in English and suggested the content that should appear in 4 broad, overlapping bands of schooling (K-4, 4-7, 7-10, 10-11). The anonymous authors of this document argued that the Statement on English was not a national syllabus, nor was it designed to replace existing state or territory curriculum documents. The Statement, however, did have links with the proposed National English Profile which will describe the intended learning outcomes for pupils in K-10. The National English Profile is meant to serve as a framework for assessment (A National Statement on English for Australian Schools, 1991). Reactions to the first draft of the National Statement were swift and on the whole negative (Australian Reading Association: personal communication, 1/8/91). Problems with the Statement included the lack of a clear theoretical position, the lack of regard to the 'process' of learning, the lack of a link with existing state syllabus documents, the lack of a rationale for the "bands of attainment", and the listing of highly specific educational outcomes (stated as objectives).

Much concern was also expressed about the fact that the only goal of the Statement was to develop a National Profile, the sole intention of which is to derive an Assessment Framework. A second draft of the National Statement on English appeared in January 1992 and currently public submissions are being obtained. A personal view of the second draft is that many of the previously stated criticisms still hold for this version.

In practice and at the state level we are uncertain what role and status the National Statement on English and the National English profile will have. However, given the demand that the achievement of children at the end of primary school and year 9 must be reported across the country it is possible that each state will report the literacy achievement of pupils at these two levels of schooling in terms of their own attainment levels or benchmarks. Whether these Attainment Levels or benchmarks will have a "high degree of comparability" between states and/or with the National English profile is highly questionable.

Tensions and Resolutions?

A number of tensions are apparent if one examines what is happening in literacy assessment in this country.

Firstly, a conflict is immediately obvious to many educators examining the federal governments' pressure to develop national goals (curriculum and reporting of achievement) and the state government's pursuit of similar, parallel goals. On the one hand, the federal government is striving towards achieving national curriculum control and a common assessment approach, and on the other hand, each state is developing its own curriculum framework and statement of attainment levels. Issues of comparability of curriculum and attainment domains and levels have not been publicly debated. Whether the incongruity between the federal and state agendas will be solved in the future and how is a matter of concern.

Secondly, to date most states in Australia have avoided employing single or particular measures to assess literacy (NSW and the Northern Territory are exceptions). Indeed, most states continue to encourage the use of a multiplicity of measures consistent with their curriculum guideline statements about the complexity, the purpose, and context of language and language use (Education Department of South Australia: *Literacy Assessment in Practice R-7* 1991; Education Department of Queensland *Years 1-10 English Language Arts: Curriculum Guide*, 1991). However, Australian teachers have yet to see whether the diversity of measures currently being used in the classroom in most states can be married to the specific curriculum content and the attainment levels being laid down by the states and federal governments. Teachers in the states of Queensland and South Australia have not yet used the details collected via their classroom assessment tasks and the attainment levels/benchmarks together.

A third concern is the likely increase in time and effort required by teachers to report the information to the states. It may not be that teachers will undertake any more or any less assessment of their pupils than currently is the case, but it is most likely that two different reporting mechanisms will be needed: one for reporting to parents and another for reporting to

a state. This will mean increased demands on teacher time and energy. In addition, time will have to be set aside to inservice teachers so that they are familiar with the attainment levels and how information is to be reported.

Fourthly, each state has been surveying the literacy achievements of different age levels (e.g., Queensland Years 5, 7, and 9; South Australia Years 6 and 10, New South Wales Years 3 and 6), and some have used light sampling techniques (e.g., Queensland) and others have assessed all children (New South Wales). Whether each will continue to operate as they have to date, as well as implementing yearly assessments of pupils at the end of primary school and Year 9 as required in the White paper, and whether such assessments require the involvement of all pupils at these Year levels or just a sample is not clear.

Finally, it is not obvious how the results from the national testing and the state-wide attainment level reporting will be used. Their real purpose is one of managerial accountability. It is argued by some politicians, however, that these forms of assessment are for educational purposes, that is, that they have a diagnostic function. The literature, however, clearly shows that it is most difficult to reconcile the 'monitoring' and 'diagnostic' functions of assessment (Broadfoot, Abbott, Croll, Osborn, Pollard & Towler, 1991; Codd, McAlpine & Poskitt, 1991; Conner, 1990; Harnett & Naish, 1990).

It is likely that the specification of standards of attainment and reporting of performance in terms of attainment levels will lead to the making of comparisons between children, teachers, schools and states. In doing so the nature of assessment practice in Australia will be radically altered.

In order that we do not lose all that we have achieved in literacy practice in our classrooms, educators will need to be more vigilant of the content of federal and state government policies, demand more public debate on the incongruities and contradictions, seek to inform the public and the media about the purposes of assessment and the interpretation of results, and become more explicit about how the assessment undertaken by teachers is linked to sound instructional decisions for individual children.

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